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This article describes a program of research on students conducted at the University of Wisconsin. It presents the general objectives of the program reviews types of student information collected regularly, and summarizes the major findings of eight recent studies in this area. A major purpose of the program is to provide a guide for administrative and institutional planning.

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College Self Study
WICHE

V. Institutional Studies of Student Characteristics

. . . . . J. Kenneth Little

I am going to describe a program of research on students in which I have worked at the University of Wisconsin. I shall describe the general objectives of this program, an outline of the types of basic information which we regularly collect there, and brief comments on some special studies which we have undertaken recently.

General Objectives

The program of studying students has as its objective the collection of such information about the student body, past and present or future, as is needed to: (1) guide administrative and institutional planning; (2) interpret the institution to its public; (3) prepare institutional reports as requested by government agencies and/or educational associations to which the institution belongs; and (4) contribute new information or fresh insights and understandings about the characteristics of students or groups of students, and their achievement and progress in the institution.

Basic Information

In developing basic information on students, several steps are followed: (1) a decision is made regarding the types of information for which there is recurring or frequent use; that is, we try to anticipate the need for data on students--from the time they are applicants through the period in which they become alumni--that will be needed for carrying out a variety of institutional programs. (2) Coordination is sought in the development of forms and procedures to be used in gathering data about students. It is crucial that this step be taken, in order that the special needs of administrators in the offices of admissions, registration, student records, counseling, placement, fee assessment, alumni records, and institutional reports can be met. They must be able to use with accuracy all the data that is collected. (3) A comprehensive standard enrollment report is developed for administrative use. The report is composed of those tables of basic information about students for which there is recurring or frequent use. (4) Interpretive summaries of the above information, showing facts or trends which have significance for institutional planning or are useful in institutional publicity are prepared. And (5) visual materials are developed which describe facts and trends in simple and pictorial fashion. These are especially valuable for use in

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presenting data to audiences not generally familiar with the institutional programs.

Several types of information are included as "basic student enrollment information" at the University of Wisconsin. Let me review three major types of basic information and, under each heading, list the specific items of data which we collect:

(1) New and advanced standing students. For these students the following information is procured: a) origin--high school or college attended, home address, (city, county, state, nation); b) occupation of parents--(also, whether alumni of university); c) sex and marital status--single, married (number of children); d) quality--(rank in class; test scores; scholarship assistance); e) self-help--(extent of part-time work); f) course of study elected; and g) veteran status.

(2) Continuing Students. For those students enrolled over a period of time at the university, the following information is continually recorded: a) college residence; b) academic classification (college, degree, major); c) courses in which enrolled; d) grades earned in courses--(g.p.a. and cumulative g.p.a.); e) scholarship and honors; f) action--(academic and conduct); and g) transcripts.

(3) For alumni, the following information is sought: a) address b) occupation--(type and position) and c) special achievements.

Large schools usually accomplish the analysis and tabulation of this information through the use of business machines. Small schools do not require this type of assistance, usually. Analysis as detailed as this is likely to be burdensome to schools whose enrollment are too small to justify machine procedures, but are too large for manual counting and tabulation. Such schools usually settle for less elaborate information and analysis.

The type of enrollment report used will vary from one institution to another. The point is to collect and organize data in such a form that it can serve as a handy reference and at the same time serve to facilitate quick studies of changes or trends in student enrollments and in other features of student characteristics. Much of the information should be in such a form that it can be readily cast into other tables and used easily for investigations in depth.

Special Studies

Let me now describe some of the information developed from special studies of student characteristics. I will try to give you a skeleton outline of the studies and some indication of the major findings of each.

(1) Trends in the quality of students, 1930-1955. A comparison was made of entering freshmen students in 1930, 1935, 1940, 1945, 1950, and 1955 on such measures as: (a) rank in high school graduating class; (b) percentile rank on the American Council Psychological Examination; (c) grade point average in freshman year. Result: today's students show superiority on each measure.

(2) Achievement and persistence of academically talented students in a state university. A follow-up study was made of high ranking high school graduates who entered the university. A comparison was made between those who persisted through two years with those who did not. Patterns of difficulty in areas of greatest and least academic mortality were studied, as were reasons for discontinuance. Result: the study showed the unfortunate amount of attrition among such students; academic maladjustment seemed to equal financial difficulty as a causative factor.

(3) A comparison of members of the 1953 freshmen class who graduated four years later with (a) those who were dropped for scholastic deficiency; (b) those who withdrew voluntarily; and (c) those who transferred to other institutions. This study is still in progress. Findings so far indicate that students ranking in the top one-fourth of the class in both high school ranking and mental test scores furnished the majority of those who graduated four years later. One-half of all entering students and one-third of the graduates had experienced scholastic difficulty in one or more of their semester's work. The loss of high ability freshmen before graduation approximates less from this group between high school graduation and college entrance. Students in courses with specific occupational objectives had higher persistence ratios than did those in general purpose courses.

(4) A test of the effect of suggested admissions standards. 1957 graduates were used as the test group. Several proposed admissions standards (rank in high school class, rank among all high school graduates on a mental test, rank among entering university freshmen on a psychological examination, and other entrance tests) were applied to learn to what extent the use of such standards would have denied admission to those who became graduates. Result: none of the standards, whether used singly or in combination, provided a screen which would not have excluded a sizeable number of the graduates. Some of those who would have been excluded were honor students.

(5) A study of the 1957 graduates. This study focused upon (a) the proportion of the graduates who continued on to graduate or professional schools, by field, (b) the types of occupations entered and the starting salaries, and (c) the migration of the students to graduate schools or jobs. Result: from 20 to 25 per cent of the men were moving immediately to advanced studies; seven to ten per cent of the women were doing so. About one-third of these had been awarded fellowships or assistantships. The liberal arts college furnished the largest number of graduate students. The graduates accepted positions in all parts of the nation and many parts of the world.

(6) A study of differences in marking practices between departments and within departments. The following data were collected: 1) distribution of marks among students with various average achievements; 2) comparisons of marks earned by students in a given course with those earned by the students in all other courses, and 3) patterns of course

difficulty as experienced by students who became academic casualties. Regarding the latter, three specific topics were studied: (a) relative importance of verbal skills, (b) sex differences, and (c) the importance of occupational or other specific goals. This study is still in progress.

(7) Factors influencing decisions of youth about education beyond the high school. A state-wide study was undertaken of 1957 Wisconsin high school graduates and their plans for education beyond the high school. Topics studied included student's abilities, family backgrounds, school and community differences, and academic preparation. Results: the study eliminated the important motivational differences between boys and girls. Further, the strong influence of educational attainment of parents became evident. This study compared students going to public colleges with those going to private colleges.

(8) A study of scholarships held by college students--1958. Students in all Wisconsin colleges and universities reported during registration in the Fall term of 1958 whether they held scholarships; the source and value of the scholarships; whether they needed the scholarship to attend college; whether they borrowed money and from what source; and whether they would be required to work part time while attending college; and if so, how much time. Result: about 16 per cent of all students interviewed reported that they held scholarships. About one-third of the scholarships were from non-university sources. Ten per cent of the scholarship holders said they would not be in school without the scholarship, forty-seven per cent said attendance would have been doubtful, and fifty-three per cent said they would have attended without the scholarship. About 20 per cent of all students involved had borrowed money, including the many who said they also had scholarships. About 25 per cent reported that they must work part time while attending college.

The studies reported above are samples of studies completed or underway at the University of Wisconsin. Many other types of studies are contemplated, and will be carried out within the next several years.